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THE SCIENCE OF MEANINGS¹

"EVEN as are the generations of leaves, such are those likewise of men; the leaves that be the wind scattereth on the earth, and the forest buddeth and putteth forth more again, when the season of spring is at hand; so of the generations of men one springeth and another passeth away." So sang Homer of the human race, drawing to illustrate the transitory nature of man's life a picture the charm of which will never die. But it illustrates one aspect only of the life of man, and few would maintain that it was intended as a full or adequate representation of human life. "At each year's fall the forests change their leaves; those green in spring then fall; even so the old race of words passes away, while new-born words like youths flourish in vigorous life." So Horace, in obvious imitation of Homer, and with like purpose; to show, namely, that "we must pay the debt of death, we and our works." But it was reserved for the last half of the century that has just ended to take this as a full and adequate picture of the life of language. This standpoint, first taken by Schleicher, a botanist and a Darwinian, and given precision by Leskien in his assertion of the validity of phonetic law, has had its use in the development of the science of language. It has banished the sporadic exception and has made inquirers feel it binding on them to account definitely for all variations from the norm evidently followed by sounds in the history of language; and has thus contributed very much to clear and definite thought in this sphere. But that it was an adequate account of the development of language that was thus to be attained, and that human volition could be ignored in dealing with a mental product like human speech could hardly be long maintained. The period of language-study that aimed to show that language, like the natural sciences, was subject to laws that admitted of no exceptions, has had its triumphs—triumphs so brilliant that they far more than vindicate for it its place as a stage in language-studies; but for the

¹*Semantics*, by M. BREAL, New York, Henry Holt & Co.

last ten years the feeling has been growing among thoughtful inquirers that this method, however useful it might be in regulating inquiry, could scarcely give a full and adequate account of language even from the purely phonetic side, the side to which inquiries have been mainly confined during its prevalence. Some four years ago Michel Bréal, the translator of Bopp, ventured to publish a volume of about 300 pages in which he embodied in connected form material, part of which he had already ventured to publish as separate essays. This volume was evidently intended to challenge the prevalent method of language-study and to essay an inquiry into that aspect of language in which the part played by human volition was least likely to be questioned, viz., the science of meanings—or *La Sémantique* as he termed it. It became evident at once that Bréal's essay was well timed. The scientific method had achieved but little during the past decade, and men's questionings as to its adequacy had been gaining in strength. It was evidently more and more felt that, to achieve results of importance in language-study, new and fertilizing ideas must be introduced, and the method followed must be modified in accordance with them; and Bréal's essay, which initiated an inquiry in a fresh sphere of investigation, received a warm welcome. This essay, which I read with much interest at the time of its appearance, and which is now made accessible to all in a good translation by Mrs. Henry Cust, I purpose noticing briefly.

Brief indeed would have been the notice it would have received from the student of philology who made any pretense of keeping up with the times, had it appeared five years before. The method of the *Jung-grammatiker* had been enthusiastically accepted at Oxford, and had been made a touchstone to try the worth of all new work that had to do with philological questions. No matter what the experience and special knowledge of a writer might be, let him neglect a phonetic law, and he was at once set down as a dunce in language-studies, and the scantest notice was justified by a reference to this neglect. Take, for an example of what I mean, the notice given in the *Classical Review* to Jhering's *Vorgeschichte der Indo-Europäer*. I have not the

number at hand, but it was astounding to me to see what short process was made with a scholar of Jhering's eminence, because of his deviation from rules laid down by Brugmann's followers. The fact that these rules found themselves so thoroughly at home in Oxford might well raise doubts as to their validity. We all remember the saying that when German science is dead it goes to Oxford. However this may be, Bréal is not a follower of Brugmann in all his teachings; he often ignores the teachings of the reigning school, when he is plainly in error in so doing. He plainly still holds to the old, discredited theory of Bopp as to the origin of the *r* passive in Latin—that *amor* = *amo se*; for we read on page 85 of this translation that "it was by taking possession of the reflexive form that the greater part of the Indo-European languages, and especially Latin and Greek, contrived to create a passive voice," and he exemplifies this view on the next page as follows: "'Pascitur' meant 'he nourishes himself' before it meant 'he is nourished.'" And on page 26 he evidently identifies *-bam* and *-bo*, the endings of the Latin imperfect and future, with *fuam* and *fuo*, and thinks the ending *-si* of the Latin perfect a derivative of the verb *esse*. Such heresies as these would hardly have been endured patiently had he published his book five years before.

Bréal's little book is an attempt to vindicate for human volition a sphere of activity in the history of language. He feels that the time is ripe for approaching language from the side on which it appeals to mind. Not that he believes that any man by taking thought can change, through his individual impulse, a sound or a form of expression in the language of his people. The will that presides over changes in language is not usually conscious and deliberate, but a dim but persistent striving, which "should be represented under the form of thousands, of millions, of billions of furtive attempts, for the most part unfortunate, sometimes attended by a partial success, attempts which, thus guided, thus corrected, thus made perfect, attain to definiteness in some specified direction." Languages have been treated during the last half-century as though they were living organisms, and we have been reading of the birth, propagation,

struggle, and death of words. This abuse of metaphors and abstractions is the main danger impending over language-studies. One has the feeling, as he reads M. Bréal's book, that it is a danger that threatens himself at times. On page 75, for example, where he is dealing with the ways in which Greek substitutes the augment at times for the reduplication, he compares its course to "the labor of some ingenious animal, which builds itself a house with materials unequally fitted for the purpose." It would rather seem to me that, instead of a conscious substitution of the augment for the reduplication, we have here a formation on the analogy of such perfects as *ἔολπα* and *ἔοργα*, where the apparent augment was originally a reduplication, the original forms being *φέρολπα* and *φέφοργα*.

And one of the main defects in Bréal's book seems to me a tendency to minimize the importance of the influence of analogy, which is perhaps not unnatural in an opponent of the *Junggrammatiker*. He has divided his treatise on Semantics into three parts, entitled (1) The Intellectual Laws of Language, (2) How the Meaning of Words is Determined, (3) How Syntax is Formed. Of these the second part seems to me to present least that is novel or interesting. Certainly there is little in it to call forth criticism or contradiction. But in the first part, where Bréal has endeavored to formulate certain intellectual laws which preside over the evolution of language, there is much to interest the language student. Here it seems to me that the law of analogy to which he has devoted the sixth chapter, might well have been given the first place; for most of the changes he enumerates, though they may be due indirectly to what he terms specialization, differentiation, irradiation, etc., are due directly to the influence of analogy. Take, for example, an instance of differentiation not cited by M. Bréal. By the law of differentiation words once synonyms take different meanings, and can no longer be used indiscriminately. A good example of this seems to me to be presented by the differentiation of the comparative forms like *maior* and *maius* in Latin. They are in reality related like *arbor* and *arbos* or *honor* and *honos*; that is to say, *maior* is merely a form of *maios*;

the olden form of *maius*, in which the final *s* has been changed to *r* after the analogy of the oblique cases *maioris*, *maiori*, *maiorem*, etc., where the intervocal *s* was changed to *r* by phonetic law. This being the case, we are not surprised to find that in the second century B. C. Roman authors wrote *bellum Punicum prior*, or *posterior*, and no distinctions regarding gender existed between *prior* and *prius*. But in the first century B. C. *prior* is differentiated as the masculine and feminine, *prius* as the neuter form. But this distinction is clearly brought about by the law of analogy, and probably followed the following cause. While men were at liberty to say *labor maior* or *maios*, *opus maior* or *maios*, the principle of analogy would lead to their favoring *labor maior* and *opus maios*, and would further lead to the shortening of the *o* in *maios* after the analogy of the final syllable in *opu*. and the speedy change of *maios* to *maius*. This association of the forms according to analogy of endings would naturally lead to the use of *maior* as a masculine and feminine, and of *maios* as a neuter form. But Bréal has not yet taken up the law of analogy when he is dealing with such cases, and so does not attempt to show the direct course through which the differentiation, with which he deals, was brought about. So in what he terms "false perceptions," where, for example, the ending *er* in *childer* or *en* in *oxen*, which are really endings of the root, are taken for plural endings, it is through analogy that they came to be so regarded, and in the syntax of *je vous respecte et vous porte une vive affection*, the repetition of *vous* before *porte* is due to the analogy of *je le respecte et lui porte une vive affection*. Of course, M. Bréal sees this, but he has not yet given his reader the chapter on analogy, and the reader may be at some disadvantage in consequence.

But while analogy is usually the intellectual law through which most of the changes in meaning or use noticed by M. Bréal are brought about, it is of great value to have the indirect mental tendencies clearly stated and tabulated, that are at work behind analogy, and are indirectly concerned in bringing about these changes. Indeed, in case of his first law—the law of specialization—it seems to me we may often have direct action

without the mediating inference of analogy. The operation and effects of this law in leading from the synthetic to the analytic stage of language have been stated by Bréal with great skill and truth in his first chapter. That the list of laws he has given is aught but tentative, he would, no doubt, be the last to affirm, and he has tried to guard against any idea that these are analogous to the laws governing natural phenomena, defining law as "the constant relations discoverable in a series of phenomena."

The third part of his work, entitled "How Syntax is Formed," is rather slight and sketchy. M. Bréal sees the interest of this side of language-study, standing, as it seems to me, between the science of meanings and the phonetic study of word-formation and inflexions, but he no doubt likewise sees its difficulty. It has been investigated by Delbrück, who unfortunately devotes his main attention to the meaning of words and forms, ignoring almost entirely the relations suggested by the forms of the inflexions. Both the form of the inflexion and the meaning and use of the word of which it forms a part must be carefully considered if anything is to be achieved here, and it is here, it seems to me, that comparative grammar may best hope to achieve new triumphs. But these cannot as a rule be hoped for as the result of a lucky guess. To take Bréal's account of the evolution of the accusative as an example; it seems to me most improbable that we have in *Hac itur Elysium* the oldest use of the accusative. Has the Greek term *πτῶσις αἰτιατικῇ* no weight in Bréal's opinion? Or is it likely that if this were the primary force of the accusative, there would have been developed in the *ursprache* the synonymous locative that is represented by the Greek *οἴκαδε* or the Latin *huc*? And when he answers the question as to whether transitive or neuter verbs are the older, I do not find myself in complete agreement with him. If you define transitive verbs as those which "require to be followed by what has been called a *complement*," as he seems to do on page 190, then we have no transitive verbs. Surely *to kill* is a transitive verb, and yet *thou shalt not kill* is not a violation of the rules of grammar. But if verbs which are capable of taking such a *complement*

are transitive, then the oldest phenomena of language of which we have any knowledge seem to indicate that all verbs, to begin with, could take such a *complement*, and it is only through a process of degeneration and loss of meaning that a verb like *esse* becomes a mere copula, and loses its governing force. The term transitive seems to me an unfortunate one here, for *to strike a blow* seems to me an older use of the accusative than *to strike a man*; and *nocere alicui*, rather than *βλάπτειν τινά*, the original syntax.

But the book on the whole is excellent; and even when one differs from Bréal, one cannot but recognize the grace and good sense shown in his suggestions. I venture to add here a few of the solutions suggested by him which I cannot accept without reserve. Surely the derivation of *totus* suggested on page 93 can hardly be maintained. He thinks the Romans must first have said *tota terra, quota est* and then by suppression have obtained *tota terra*. But surely the usual Latin suppression would have given *quota terra*, with which compare *quotannis* and *quotidie*. More probable seems to me the derivation proposed by Brugmann in the last edition of his Comparative Grammar that *totus* is the past participle of a verb *toveo*, to stuff, from which we have the derivative *tomentum*. With regard to the adverbs in *-e*, like *docte* and *recte*, he suggests on page 87 that there was originally a double formation (*docto* or *docte*) and that usage gave the preference to the form in *-e* "which stood out better from the ordinary declension." He has in mind adjectives like *hilaris* or *hilarus*, *imbellis* or *imbellus*. "*Animus*," he says, "made *examinis*, *fama* made *infamis*, *clivus* made *proclivis*, *pæna* made *impunis*, and so on." *Bellum* thus would make *imbellis*, rather than *imbellus*, and *imbellis* and *hilaris* are probably the older forms, and represent an older type of adjective, so far as gender is concerned, being adjectives that distinguish two genders instead of three. If this is the case, the ablative forms in *-e* are older, and could establish a type, after the analogy of which adverbs would be formed from adjectives like *doctus* or *bonus*, even though these adjectives had never the older forms *doctis-e* or *bonis-e* which we cannot prove or disprove. On page 73 he speaks of a feminine *felix* producing a masculine and a

neuter. But if we compare the Greek cognate *θῆλυς*, we find, notwithstanding the meaning, that from the masculine form *θῆλυς* a feminine *θήλεια* has been evolved; so that it is by no means certain that *felix* was feminine before it was masculine. The truth seems rather to be, as stated by Appel, that the form *felix*, used as a form for persons without distinction of sex, has by analogy replaced the old neuter form *felic*. But if in the nominative *felix* we have a masculine, a feminine, and a neuter form, how does he come to state, as he does on page 58, that "in Latin the declension is shorter by one case in the plural than in the singular." "The dative and ablative possess, and probably have always possessed, a single plural inflexion." But they have at least two for each of these cases, the endings *-is* and *-bus*; and surely *felix* has but one inflexion. Why then three genders? And on page 232 he calls *ferme* a double of *firme*, but is it not rather a superlative of *ferē*?

As an appendix to Mrs. Cust's translation of Bréal's essay, is published a lecture by Professor Postgate on the "Science of Meaning," delivered shortly before the appearance of the essay, and the same author has written a preface of fifty-odd pages for this edition. Both have their interest and yet they can hardly be placed on the same level with M. Bréal's work. In his lecture Mr. Postgate proposes to give to the science of meaning the name *Rhematology*, using the word *rheme* (Greek *ῥῆμα*) to name the expression of a single notion or idea. Now, in Greek, *ῥῆμα* is a phrase as opposed to a single word (*ὄνομα*); but as at times a phrase or statement may be conveyed by a single word, e.g., *πράττει*, which word is usually a verb, it has been transferred to the expression of this idea by the grammarians. To say nothing of beauty of phrase, then, I should regard it as unfortunate that we should have a new term introduced for the science of meaning, and that a term based on the use of a word unusual in the Greek grammarians. I have some recollection of the name *semasiology* as having been already applied by Professor Sayce to this branch of language-study, and a multitude of names is hardly an unmixed blessing in a case like this. Mr. Postgate asks in his lecture the question: "Why should Latin, a language which is unusually prone to the concrete, use

servitum and *servitus*, "slavery," for "slaves?" But is not *servitum* a collective, meaning "a body of slaves," before it becomes an abstract? In his preface Mr. Postgate asks why *ἀκούσομαι* is used as the future of *ἀκούω*; and he suggests this answer, which can hardly be said to be distinguished for its lucidity: "In proportion as the concept underlying a rheme is felt to involve a reference to present consciousness, will the mind experience a difficulty in referring it to the future, or, to use a metaphor, would we grasp a concept that is to be so referred, it must be provided with a handle." And presently he gives us the handle which must be used in grasping the concept *ἀκούσομαι*, to wit, the ending *-μαι*, which enforces the idea of the personal subject, I, and "represents the mental effort required to project my hearing into the future." But is not the middle future in use here merely the future of the middle form *ἀκονομαι*, found in many of its forms in the Homeric poems, and is it not natural that words "expressing the exercise of the senses or denoting some functional state or process," should be found in the middle in some, if not all, of their forms? For such an exercise is naturally thought of as confined to the subject and affecting him directly or indirectly.

Mrs. Cust's translation is, in the main, adequate, and gives clearly and fully the meaning of M. Bréal's French. But on page 153, "to remove" hardly seems a sufficient translation of "*écarter*;" on page 138, "La Bruyère, in the portrait of *Dis-trait*" is very unfortunate; and on page 52, "*Où se sont cachés, qui a dispersés nos amis?*" should at least have as illustration the connected French, "*Où se sont cachés nos amis? qui les a dispersés?*" The Greek words cited throughout are badly printed, and at times may puzzle the reader for a moment, as, for example, *Δεώκριτος* for *Δεώκριτος* on page 158. Many proper names and titles of books have been evidently copied without change from the French text, as, for example, Georges Curtius' (*saepe*), *Journal de Kuhn* (p. 74); Cauer, *Programme der Gymnase de Hamm* (p. 113). But these are minor errors, which can easily be corrected in a second edition.

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